

Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRING)

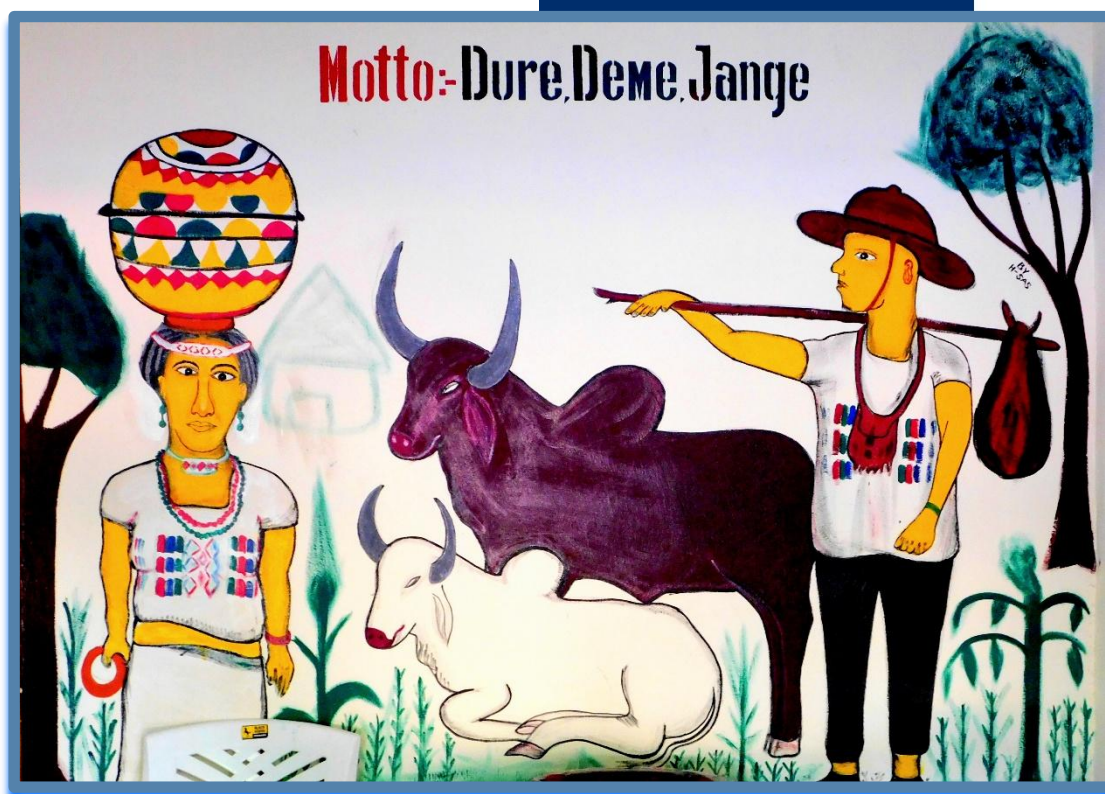
Policy Brief

Grazing Reserves, Stock Routes, and Pastoral Resources in Nigeria

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Introduction

Launched in May 2024, the Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRING) Programme is a four-year, UK-funded initiative designed to support a more peaceful and climate-resilient Nigeria. A significant component of the programme involves supporting the resolution and prevention of violent conflicts, many of which stem from competition between farmers and pastoralists over land and water in pastoral regions of Northern Nigeria. Given existing literature identifying livestock incursions on farms as the single most important cause of conflict, SPRING undertook an in-depth study of the status of grazing reserves and stock routes in early 2025. Grazing reserves and stock routes were initially established, and continue to be regarded, as an effective means of protecting cultivated areas from livestock.

The study therefore gathered quantitative data across 13 states in North-Central Nigeria, assessed state policies and development initiatives, and put forward recommendations for future programming and policy. This Policy Brief presents the key findings of the study, which are further summarised in a full Research Report.



Key Findings

Grazing reserves and stock routes were introduced in 1965 in the former Northern Region of Nigeria as an institutional land allocation strategy. They were later incorporated into federal law following the creation of new states in 1967. At the same time, the distribution of pastoralists meant that no reserves or stock routes were created in the Southern states. The objective of grazing reserves was to protect land for migrant pastoralists and to prevent incursions into cultivated fields. Stock routes were similarly intended to safeguard corridors of land for passage between farms, to connect with grazing reserves, and to establish a wider network linked to cross-border routes. Grazing reserves were also designed to serve as hubs for improved livestock production, particularly in milk and meat. Parallel studies have demonstrated that cattle incursions into farmers' fields remains the single most significant source of conflict. While grazing reserves and stock routes continue to represent an appropriate concept for reducing herder-farmer conflict, in practice heavy encroachment has rendered many of them ineffective.

Nigeria has a total of 415 grazing reserves covering 3.8 million hectares. Of these, 141 are gazetted (i.e. with legal status) and 274 are ungazetted. Initiatives to reserve land for pastoralists have existed since the pre-colonial period, with attempts to settle pastoralists beginning during the colonial era. Since 1965, a series of development projects have been implemented, most notably the two World Bank-supported Livestock Development Projects to support the establishment and maintenance of grazing reserves.

The main period of infrastructure development within the reserves took place under the World Bank Livestock Projects I and II (1976-1986 and 1987-1995), which provided dams, boreholes, pastures, seed plots, access roads, and livestock service centres. Many of these facilities are now dilapidated beyond repair. Since then, several smaller

projects with lower levels of funding have been implemented, including those supported by the FAO Range Management Intervention in Arid Zones (1990-1995), the Petroleum Trust Fund (1996-1999), and the Islamic Development Bank in Kano State. None of these initiatives have proven sustainable in the long term. More recently, the National Livestock Transformation Plan, introduced in 2019, has promoted a shift towards a ranching system; however, the allocation of land for proposed ranches is strongly resisted by state governments. Under this Plan, planted fodder plots were established in several grazing reserves. Yet, many of these are no longer functional due to a lack of protection and continued funding.

Field visits by the research team revealed that although infrastructure such as earth dams, boreholes, veterinary clinics, livestock service centres, access roads, labour lines, and schools were established under the World Bank-supported Livestock Development Plans, many of these are now in disrepair due to a lack of sustained funding and facility upkeep. In some states, there has been heavy encroachment both by farmers seeking cropland and through the transfer of parts of grazing reserves to politicians and businessmen. This trend will be difficult to reverse, except through awareness-raising on the serious long-term consequence of such actions. Many grazing reserves are also reported to be severely degraded, typically because of intense grazing pressure from a growth in the number of pastoralists, but also due to firewood collection and the illegal felling of trees.

Furthermore, the research found that state-level approaches to the rehabilitation of grazing reserves and stock routes were highly variable. Some states, such as Kano and Gombe, have taken positive steps to reduce encroachment and protect stock routes. Others remain indifferent, while a third group – particularly in the more Southern areas – actively opposes the concept. Pastoral associations have been formed in many states to advocate for the refurbishment of pastoral infrastructure. Their views are often not reflected in state government policies, however. There is a risk that, without effective policy dialogue on these issues, future initiatives are unlikely to succeed.

Recommendations

Considering the research findings presented above, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. In almost all states visited, numerical data on reserves and stock routes was incomplete and evidently inaccurate. Any programme to develop them must begin by improving the accuracy of state and federal data.
2. SPRiNG should consider working with states that have demonstrated receptiveness and willingness to invest in the maintenance and refurbishment of these institutions. Gombe, Yobe, Kano, and Nasarawa should be considered for inclusion, in addition to the four focal states. Niger State also exhibited interest, although security concerns make it difficult to operate.
3. SPRiNG should undertake a more detailed analysis of the experiences of states where ministries have begun to refurbish infrastructure, for example Kano State.
4. Many of the grazing reserves are reported to be severely degraded which should be considered in future rehabilitation. This is typically the result of intense grazing pressure from large numbers of pastoralists, but also from firewood collection and the illegal felling of trees, for example by charcoal burners. Although little empirical data is available, poor pasture growth during the rainy season and the replacement of grasses by harder but less digestible species are recommended responses.
5. Future programming should keep in mind the significant gap between the perspective of state government officials and the observations and lived experiences of pastoralists at the local level.
6. Although many states reported experimental pasture or forage plots being established, there is little evidence that these will be sustainable in the long-term. This should be explored through future pilot programmes, drawing lessons from other relevant contexts. An alternative is seeding the grasslands with nitrogen fixing species, such as *Stylosanthes* spp, an approach that can be tested further.
7. In order for grazing reserves to become attractive resources, they will need to provide at least some basic infrastructure, most importantly boreholes. Where facilities existed, they should be prioritised for rehabilitation.
8. In practice, many pastoralists migrate along roads where stock routes are blocked, leading to conflict and accidents. This system should be formalised with beacons as has already been explored in some states.
9. For any intervention to succeed in selected states, state governments must show commitment by gazetting the reserves and reducing the levels of encroachment.

10. If a reserve or stock route is selected for development, socio-economic surveys should be conducted prior to the implementation of physical infrastructure.
11. An assessment of the capacities of all major pastoral organisations within the intervention states should be conducted. This will enable the SPRiNG Programme to design a capacity-building scheme to strengthen its partnerships approach.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that grazing reserves and stock routes remain a significant strategy in the reduction of conflict between pastoralists and farmers, serving as a public good in the face of a changing climate, migration patterns, resource scarcity, and shifting demographics. The revitalisation and maintenance of their infrastructure are an important element in advancing the goals of the SPRiNG Programme and wider peace and stability in Nigeria.



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